



Arizona Early Childhood Task Force

Role of Multiple Partners in a State Early Childhood System

Remarks by Karen Ponder

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It has been stated many times during these strategic planning meetings that creating a comprehensive early childhood system includes many partners and multiple agencies and organizations. I want to offer a few thoughts on this subject and give you some lessons learned from several states that have gone through a similar process.

When NC began its focused work in 1993, I was within the DHHS, at the newly created DCD. Then I moved to the NC Partnership for Children, a not-for-profit agency, created to administer Smart Start and largely funded by the state. Moving the big agenda that we envisioned required a huge amount of coordination. The head of the Division of Child Development (DCD), the agency that housed most early education programs and services, and I often said we were joined at the hip. We made no policy decisions, revisions or major program decisions without talking to each other. Was it easy to operate that way? No! It took much more time and we didn't have time to spare. Did we achieve more together than we could have separately? No doubt about it! And was it worth the extra time and work that it took? Absolutely!

Two examples:

The reorganization of child care resource and referral services in our state is an example of our coordination and work together. Most of the funding for CCR&R services came from DCD but some local partnerships funded CCR&R services with Smart Start funds. We knew that any changes that DCD made to CCR&R services

and funding would affect Smart Start services. So we mutually decided to use the Smart Start regions as the regions for CCR&R, as one way to coordinate and build together. We met monthly to plan how to re-organize and when the plan was rolled out, we stood together to support it.

Another example was the creation of our quality rating system, which was a true collaboration between Smart Start, DCD and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). It was housed in DCD but Smart Start was a critical partner. We added the star ratings to Smart Start's performance measures. Our newly created pre-K program that was housed at DPI required all their sites to be 4 or 5- star rated. And we worked out all the details together. We were better together.

Wisconsin has done a good job of this kind of linked work and has an across agency steering committee with sub groups that meet monthly and work on the following big issues:

- Access to health insurance and medical homes
- Mental health and social-emotional development
- Early care and education
- Parenting education
- Family support

The long-term objective of WI's work is to increase coordination and integration of these 5 components fostering collaborative work and evolving into one comprehensive integrated system of services that supports families and communities with the goal: healthy, nurtured, safe and successful children from birth to school entry.

Their vision for this collaborative work is:

- To unite, harmonize and humanize policies and services concerning young children and their families;
- To allow for the blending and braiding of funding streams to enable flexible use of money to target the largest number of children and their families possible;

- To develop clear and defined communication processes between and among state departments, services systems and local providers;
- To integrate policies at the state and local level affecting dental, medical, social and emotional health, family support, parent education and early care and education;
- To elevate Wisconsin's commitment of the prenatal, infant and early childhood years of growth, recognizing this critical and foundational stage of development;
- To assist in the recognition that parents are the most influential participants in a child's development and because of this, parent education and supports are provided in easily accessible ways; and
- To build an understanding among citizens that a commitment and investment in the early years is an essential component to economic development.

A few lessons learned and recommendations from other states as you think about building a united system:

1. Communication is the key! Never assume that others know what you're doing and thinking. And remember that communication is a 2-way process. Develop strong communication mechanisms and use them. You must be intentional in communicating regularly.
2. Develop mechanisms for on-going planning and working together. As hard as it was to meet monthly with our partners, we considered it a priority and I believe what we accomplished together demonstrates the importance of having a formal way to "work and stay together".
3. You won't always agree and that is part of the value of working across agencies. There were times when my colleague and I at DCD completely disagreed on an approach or the program details, but we talked until we could agree to support a position. The early childhood community thought we always agreed on everything!which leads to my next point.

4. Argue inside the tent and support each other publicly. Nothing is to be gained for children when we fight or whine in public. We need to come to consensus before we talk to legislators and other policy makers and demonstrate a united front for children. Dissonance is harmful to the cause we're all about.

5. Make a deliberate shift to shared leadership among stakeholders that continually expands the number of leaders working to build the system. Leadership is the key and not just one lead agency or organization, and not just one individual leader, but all of you as leaders.

6. Recognize that building a comprehensive system of early learning, health and support services is a means to an end, not an end of itself. Ultimately a successful system must improve the quality of early childhood experiences and outcomes for all children.

All of you and the agencies and organizations you represent ARE the comprehensive early childhood system in AZ. And the ways you find to work together across organizational boundaries will determine how strong and effective the system can become and ultimately how well you meet the needs of the children and families in your state.